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AUTHOR Kazemek, Francis E.
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ABSTRACT

One general theory of knowledge supports a transactional perspective that defines literacy as relative and context-dependent. Exploration of this theory can begin by examining the relationship between metaphor and knowing, focusing on the underlying metaphorical nature of knowledge. If the constructionist, experiential, metaphoric account of knowledge and truth is accepted, then contention that such things as universal knowledge and truth exist must be seriously questioned. Kohlberg and Mayer, Lakoff and Johnson, and Carl Rogers offer three epistemological approaches that attempt to bridge the gulf between subjective and objective knowing and that acknowledge the nonuniversal nature of knowledge and truth. Their perspectives have much in common with those of the pragmatic philosophers. The pragmatic epistemology as expressed by Dewey, Mead, and Hook is an interactionist one. An exploration of the relationship between the experiential, pragmatic theory of knowledge and adult literacy leads to the contention that any attempt to understand adult literacy must consider all the perspectives of different communities and subcultures toward the functions and uses of literacy and ultimately the very specific perspective of the adult who functions within a specific community at any particular point in time. (Author/YLB)

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Epistemology and Adult Literacy:

An Experientialist, Pragmatic Perspective

Francis E. Kazemek
Department of Education
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, WA 99004

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ABSTRACT

"Epistemology and Adult Literacy: An Experientialist, Pragmatic Perspective"

The purpose of the article is to explore the general theory of knowledge which supports a transactional perspective of adult literacy, a perspective which defines literacy as relative and context-dependent. The author examines the relationship between metaphor and knowing by focusing on the underlying metaphorical nature of knowledge. He then presents three epistemological approaches which attempt to bridge the gulf between subjective and objective knowing and which acknowledge the non-universal nature of knowledge and truth. Finally, he briefly discusses some principles of Pragmatic epistemology as made manifest in the works of Dewey, Mead, and Hook.

The author concludes by exploring the relationship between this experiential, Pragmatic theory of knowledge and adult literacy. He contends that any attempt to understand adult literacy must consider all the perspectives of different communities and sub-cultures toward the functions and uses of literacy; ultimately, such attempts to understand adult literacy must consider the very specific perspective of the individual adult who lives and functions within a specific community at any particular point in time.

The world is such-and-such or so-and-so only
because we tell ourselves that that is the way it is.
---don Juan Matus

Introduction

How do humans know? What is knowledge? What is truth, and how does one know when one has arrived at truth? These are questions which have concerned philosophers for thousands of years. In this article I want to explore the general theory of knowledge which supports a transactional perspective of adult literacy, a perspective which defines literacy as relative and context-dependent. The article is divided into four parts: 1) an examination of the relationship between metaphor and knowledge; 2) an examination of knowledge as non-universal; 3) an examination of the Pragmatic and experientialist epistemology; 4) an examination of the relationship between epistemology and adult literacy.

Metaphor and Knowledge

I want to begin this examination of the relationship between metaphor and knowledge by looking at a quotation from the English poet, William Blake:

> "What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." (Blake, 1966, p. 617)

Which perception of the sun is more "real" or more "true": that of Blake who sees a company of angels or that of one who sees a round disk of fire? Who understands or knows the sun better? I would venture to say that most people would contend that a person who sees the sun as a round disk of fire has a truer understanding of it than a person who

sees the sun as a choir of angels. One can reasonably argue that we know the sun to be 864,000 miles in diameter, weighing more than 330,000 times as much as the earth, composed of hydrogen and helium, having a surface temperature of about 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and so forth. Thus, one can argue, the description of the sun as a round disk of fire is certainly closer to what we know about the sun than is the description of the sun as a company of singing angels.

If one does not dismiss Blake's description of the sun as little more than the ranting of a madman or a schizophrenic (as did many of his contemporaries), then one might concede that Blake is merely describing the sun in a metaphoric or "poetic" sense. The underlying assumption of such a concession is that the description of the sun as being 864,000 miles in diameter, and so forth, is literal and thus more "real" than the description of the sun as a company of angels which is figurative or metaphoric and thus less "real." This assumption that there is a reality which can be described in literal terms has a long philosophical history. Most recently, this philosophical position has been advanced by Logical Positivists who contend that all meaningful statements are analytically verifiable or are confirmable by experiment or observation.

But is this philosophical position tenable? Is there some ultimate reality which exists independently of any description of it and which can be described in "literal" language? Ortony (1979) argues against this literal, positivistic position and instead presents a constructionist position which contends that all language, even the most "scientific," is tropological. Richards (1981) maintains that thought is metaphoric and the

metaphors of language proceed from it. He says that the "pretence to do without metaphor is never more than a bluff waiting to be called" (Richards, 1981, p. 50). Likewise, Black (1979) maintains that:

> ... some metaphors enable us to see aspects of reality that the metaphor's production helps to constitute. But that is no longer surprising if one believes that the world is necessarily a world under a certain description--or a world seen from a certain perspective. (Black, 1979, pp. 39-40)

This constructionist position is most evidently seen, I believe, in the work of the new physicists whose research has shown that there is a fundamental interrelationship between the observer and what is observed: for example, whether one sees light as a wave or as a particle depends upon the way one observes and describes it. (See Zukav, 1979, for a layperson's discussion of the new physics.) Similarly, philosophers like Johnson (1981) maintain that reality depends upon the way one observes and describes; metaphoric description, rather than being radically different or cognitively inferior to literal description, is instead an omnipresent principle of all cognition. Richards contends that one knows the world through metaphor. Johnson (1981) maintains that all of one's experience has an "as" structure. The "as" structure is not a simple comparison, a listing of similarities, but is a system of correlations.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1981) contend that the human conceptual system is largely metaphorical and grounded in the interaction that individuals have with their physical environments; humans tend to conceptualize the non-physical in terms of the physical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981). Metaphors, especially what they call "conventional" metaphors, for example, UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK, IN-OUT, structure much of one's everyday language and affect the way one perceives the world. Thus, metaphors

emerge from one's interaction with the physical environment and other people and from the language used in particular cultural contexts. In America, the ways people think, speak, and act about time, ideas, and theories are affected by the metaphors TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY, IDEAS ARE FOOD, and THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS. Lakoff and Johnson (1981) maintain that the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR affects our very concept of argument, affecting in turn the ways we argue and the ways we talk about arguing.

Metaphorical concepts provide ways of "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). There are "entailment relationships" between metaphors which can result in an interconnecting metaphorical system; such a system helps one structure a particular concept. For example, in our culture, there is an entailment relationship between the metaphors TIME IS MONEY and TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE. And TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE has an entailment relationship with the metaphor TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY. Taken together, these metaphors form a system which affects the way most people think, talk, and act concerning time. Since I have precious little time to waste on trivialities, I'll let the reader consider appropriate examples from daily life.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1981) say that metaphors only <u>partially</u> structure one's concepts and extend them in certain ways but not in others. This partial nature of metaphorical structuring thus allows for the emergence or generation of new metaphors. Such new metaphors are: 1) extensions of the used part of a metaphor; 2) utilization of the unused part of a metaphor; 3) novel metaphors which are not used to structure

one's normal conceptual system. This partial structuring of the metaphors seems to me to be very close to the notion from cognitive psychology that one must find appropriate schemata, that is, interacting knowledge structures for generic concepts, to account for certain primary aspects of incoming data, but not for all of the data (Rumelhart, 1979).

In sum, Lakoff and Johnson maintain that: 1) metaphors have entailments; 2) metaphors organize certain aspects of experience and indeed are often the only way to organize experience; 3) through their entailments, metaphors may serve as guides for future action. This view of metaphor results in an experiential account of truth:

> We are thus led to a theory of truth that is dependent on understanding: a sentence is true in a situation when our understanding of the sentence fits our understanding of the situation. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981, p. 324)

Knowledge as Non-Universal

If one accepts the constructionist, experiential, metaphoric account of knowledge and truth as set forth by Lakoff and Johnson, Black, Ortony, and Richards and poetically expressed by Blake, then one is led to a position in which one must seriously question any contention that there are such things as universal knowledge and truth. Is Blake's proverb, "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees" (Blake, 1966, p. 151), much more profound and directly relevant to a discussion of epistemology than it might at first appear? In this section, I want to present briefly three discussions of how people know: that of Kohlberg and Mayer; Lakoff and Johnson; and Carl Rogers.

Kohlberg and Mayer (1981) discuss three different epistemological approaches. The "Romantic" approach is an existential-phenomenological

one which contends that knowledge and reality are personal, individual experiences; it emphasizes the over-riding importance of inner experience, personal reality, and self-knowledge. The "Cultural Transmission" approach contends that knowledge and reality are objective phenomena which ultimately can be observed, tested, or experienced by everyone. Finally, the "Pragmatic" approach contends that knowledge and reality involve the relationship between individual experience and the external situation:

> The meaning and truth of a child's experience depends on its relationship to the situations in which he or she is acting. At the same time, the progressive epistemology does not attempt to reduce psychological experience to observable responses in reaction to observable stimuli or situations. Rather, it attempts to functionally coordinate the external meaning of the child's experiences as behavior with its internal meaning as it appears to the observer. (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1981, p. 60)

Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1981) discuss three different epistemological approaches. The "Myth of Subjectivism", they argue from their examination of metaphor, ignores the fact that even the most imaginative or personal understanding is ultimately grounded in a conceptual system which has been constructed in a particular physical, cultural, and linguistic context and is ultimately based on what they call "conventional" metaphors. The "Myth of Objectivism" ignores the fact that knowledge and truth are relative to one's cultural conceptual system and are not absolute or somehow neutral. Instead, Lakoff and Johnson argue for an experiential synthesis of the two "Myths" based upon metaphor as an "imaginative reality" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 193). According to their "Experientialist Myth," truth is always relative to understanding which in turn is based on a non-universal conceptual system. "Meaning

is not cut and dried; it is a matter of imagination and a matter of constructing coherence" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 227). Thus, according to the "Experientialist Myth," knowledge and truth emerge from a constant interaction and negotiation with the environment and with other people.

Rogers (1964) says that all knowing involves the posing of hypotheses which one confirms or rejects in one of several ways. "Subjective Knowing" is the most basic way of knowing, says Rogers; it involves reference to one's feelings, to one's inner hypotheses. "Subjective Knowing" is involved when one asks oneself, "Do I hate him" or "Do I really love her?" "Objective Knowing" involves the confirmation or rejection of hypotheses by using externally-observable operations or procedures and/or the reactions of a trusted reference group. Experimental research represents this kind of knowing. Rogers points out that although this way of knowing is the hallmark of Western science it is not necessarily superior to "Subjective Knowing." Finally, "Interpersonal Knowing" involves the confirmation or rejection of an hypothesis by trying to get inside another person's field of meaning. This can be done in various ways: for example, one can ask the person, "How do you feel today? You look blue." or one can try to get the consensus of others, "I'm worried about Charlie today. Doesn't he look and act depressed about something?"

Rogers argues that all three ways of knowing are necessary for a satisfactory behavioral science. He rejects a strict Behavioral approach because it conceives of people as machines, and he rejects a strict

Freudian or neo-Freudian approach because it conceives of people as irrational beings. Rather, he says that the individual must be seen as one who is in the process of not only actively creating meaning in life, but also actively creating the self.

Kohlberg and Mayer's "Pragmatic" approach, Lakoff and Johnson's "Experientialist Myth," and Rogers' unified approach--although they differ in certain specific ways--all present a particular epistemological perspective. All of these authors are arguing for an epistemology which attempts to bridge the chasm between subjective and objective knowing, and which acknowledges the transactional or interactional manner in which an individual constructs non-universal knowledge within a particular cultural context.

Pragmatic Epistemology

The perspectives of Kohlberg and Mayer, Lakoff and Johnson, and even Rogers--though he is certainly not in the Pragmatic tradition--have much in common with those of the Pragmatic philosophers. In this section, I want to look briefly at the Pragmatic contentions that knowledge and truth must be subjected to the test of experience and that truth depends upon experience in relation to specific situational contexts. I will focus primarily on some ideas of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead.

The Pragmatic epistemology as expressed by philosophers like Dewey, Mead, and, more recently, Hook is an interactionist one. Knowledge and truth, they maintain, depend upon an individual's experience in relation to specific external situations. Dewey (1948) explains the Pragmatic idea of the "logic of individualized situations" in the following manner:

> We cannot seek or attain health, wealth, learning, justice, or kindness in general. Action is always specific, concrete, individualized, unique. And consequently, judgments as to be performed must be similarly specific. (Dewey, 1948, pp. 166-7)

Likewise, Mead (1964) contends that "there is no such thing as Truth at large. It is always relative to the problematic situation" (Mead, 1964, p. 324).

Although knowledge and truth are unique, individualized, and relative to a specific situation, this does not mean that Dewey and Mead are advocating solipsism. Dewey (1938; 1960) says that these individual, specific, and concrete actions must always be seen from within their social context:

> Philosophy proclaims its devotion to the universal. But as the profession of cosmopolitan philanthrophy which is not rooted in neighborly friendliness is suspect, so I distrust the universals that are not reached by way of profound respect for the significant features and outcomes of human experience as found in human institutions, traditions, impelling interests, and occupations. (Dewey, 1960, p. 109)

Mead (1934; 1964) likewise says that although every object in the universe is seen from the perspective of a particular individual, reality is the integration of these different perspectives. And Hook (1974) maintains that the Pragmatic interactional approach to knowledge and truth is ultimately a method for clarifying ideas and determining which idea or ideas among competing ones best account for all the facts of a situation and thus best help people and society in solving some specific trouble, problem, or conflict. Pragmatism, according to Hook, is basically a method of criticism. And such criticism is difficult and demanding. It does not involve the common, distorted notion of Pragmatism as advocating that "whatever works

is good." Dewey says, "So repulsive is a conception of truth which makes it a mere tool of private ambition and aggrandizement, that the wonder is that critics have attributed such a notion to sane men" (Dewey, 1948, p. 157). Rather, Pragmatism as a method of criticism for clarifying ideas involves relentless labor and involvement:

> It disturbs the sense of rest that is attached to the ideas of fixed Truth already in existence. It puts a heavy burden of responsibility upon us for search, unremitting observation, scrupulous development of hypotheses and thoroughgoing testing. (Dewey, 1948, p. 159)

Furthermore, knowledge and truth are not only relative and constantly constructed and tested by individuals within a social framework, but are also culturally determined. Hall (1976) maintains that culture designates what individuals pay attention to and what they ignore; it is impossible, he says, to separate an individual's understanding from the culture within which she develops and functions. For example, an individual growing up in a traditional Navajo community will attend to different things in nature than an individual growing up in a middle-class suburb or an inner-city ghetto. And each of these individuals will have different perspectives and understandings of nature based upon specific and unique experiences. This does not mean that the perspective of one of the individuals is somehow inherently "better" than the perspectives of the others, regardless of what a romantic admirer of Native Americans might want to argue. They are different perspectives, and, as Mead maintains, truth and reality involve the testing of different perspectives and the integration of different perspectives.

According to the Pragmatic epistemology, knowledge and truth are arrived at by considering all the facts available, engaging in critical analysis, searching for additional hypotheses, and then thoroughly testing these hypotheses in order to arrive at the best possible solution or course of action which one can determine at that particular point in time. And this is what Hook (1974) calls the "tragic sense of life": the realization that there are always alternatives which are perhaps as good or better than the choice one has made. (I think of Robert Frost who poetically captures this "tragic sense" in his poem, "The Road Not Taken": "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--/I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference.") Morever, as Hook continues, sometimes after considering all of the facts one must choose not between competing goods, but between the proverbial "lesser of two evils." In a complex world, choices are seldom simple or seldom cast in black and white terms.

Thus, as an example of such choice making, let's consider the different perspectives that different people from different cultural contexts have concerning nature and the preservation of natural resources. One can argue that the present exploitation of natural resources on Indian reservations in the western states is not the result of a serious consideration of all of the facts and all of the perspectives available. It is not based on an integration (where possible) of competing claims and different perspectives concerning, for example, the balance between immediate needs and the needs of future generations. The present exploitation is ultimately based on the assumption or assertion that one way of perceiving reality is the best or true way. On the other hand, those who argue for no development of natural resources are often just as adamant

in their refusal to consider any other perspective than their own. They likewise believe that they have found the "fixed Truth already in existence" and can therefore rest in the comfort of that Truth.

Epistemology and Adult Literacy

How does this discussion of epistemology apply to adult literacy and adult literacy education? According to the Pragmatic and experientialist approaches to epistemology, there are no universal ideas of knowledge and truth. Applying this epistemology to adult literacy, one sees immediately that there is no one "best" definition of adult literacy or "best" way of being literate. Rather, adult literacy is a relative concept which depends upon an individual's experiences within a specific physical and social environment. Any attempt to understand adult literacy must accordingly consider all the facts, all the perspectives of different communities and sub-cultures toward the functions and uses of literacy and, ultimately, the very specific perspective of an adult within a specific community at any specific point in time throughout the day. Any attempt to understand adult literacy must consider one's aims, ways of acting, ways of reacting to feedback, and the specific situational context and its demands in which one's literacy, or absence of literacy, occurs.

And this is precisely what competency-based models of adult literacy fail to do. As Collins (1983) observes, such models and systems are basically quests for certainty:

> They are based on the questionable assumption that competency is something that can be grasped apart from the practical activity in which it is expressed. Since competency statements are divorced from an individual's real life context, they are artificial. (Collins, 1983, p. 178)

These competency-based models and systems are artificial and fail because they attempt to do what the Pragmatists say can't be done, that is, separate knowing and truth from action and interaction. They attempt to establish standards which do not involve, as Dewey contends, "unremitting observation."

These competency-based systems are ultimately based upon a logical positivistic philosophy and a behavioral psychology. Epistemologically, as Collins (1983) observes, these systems "assume that there is a social reality already 'in place' rather than one which is flux over which we have conscious influence" (Collins, 1983, p. 182). And this leads one back immediately to Dewey's criticism of those who believe and rest in the "ideas of fixed Truth already in existence." In such systems, individuals are not perceived as conscious creators of reality and self; rather, illiterate adults are perceived as people who must have something done to them by others in order to "bring them up" to some standard of adequacy. The metaphor employed by the advocates of such systems is the telltale: illiteracy is an illness which cripples. Illiterate adults are called "clients" (Northcutt, 1975), who are "disabled" (Meyer, 1982); the teachers are doctors who "diagnose" the clientele (Lamorella et al., 1983) and treat them with "prescriptions" (Lamorella et al., 1983). In the treatment, the teachers must use an "arsenal of strategies" (McCullough, 1981) in order to make the illiterate literate. (One must wonder, considering Lakoff and Johnson's discussion of metaphor entailments, upon whom and for what purposes the "war" is being waged?) The adult illiterate is also perceived

as a passive individual who must be motivated, inspired, goaded, or saved by someone else. This view of the adult illiterate as someone who must be "fixed" in some way by a knowing teacher has direct and long-term ethical and political effects. It results in what Freire (1970a; 1970b; 1978) calls the "banking" model of education in which a supposedly-knowing teacher "banks" or "deposits" knowledge into the head of a learner. Such "banking," Freire contends, such education in which the teacher refuses to learn from the adult student, simply attempting to transfer information into the student's head, grows out of an ideology of domination. Like Dewey, although radically different in many ways, Freire argues that information is only useful when a problem has been posed by the learner--a problem which requires the learner's active involvement, and active analysis of self, situation in society, and the society itself. If the problem is posed by the teacher for the learner, then, says Freire, the learner becomes little more than an object or, to use Buber's (1970) terminology, an "It" who must be manipulated.

Conclusion

Freire, like the Pragmatists, argues that knowledge and truth are processes which emerge from the conscious action of humans on the social and physical environment in which they exist, an environment which, in turn, affects them. Thus, ultimately, the epistemology upon which one's view of adult literacy is based involves much more than a discussion or analysis of how people know and how they determine what is true; it also involves a discussion of how they ought to use knowledge and truth, how

they ought to act in the world. And this leads one into the realm of ethics, a topic which most competency-based models of adult literacy tend scrupulously to ignore or, at best, tend to make only passing reference to. But ethics, like epistemology, I maintain, should help form the foundation of adult literacy education. Together, epistemology and ethics comprise the "basics" which adult literacy educators, theoreticians, and program developers must begin to explore.

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